

A New Millennium and a New Political Era

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The concept in itself looks highly commendable. In Sri Lanka, we have been in quite a bit of political stalemate, trying to experiment with democracy and socialism. In the early decades of the twentieth century, these two systems which were sponsored by enthusiastic local exponents with more than adequate training overseas, stood facing each other with clenched fists. In post World War II Sri Lanka, changing political fortunes at home brought them nearer to each other. But their health was never tested in quarantine camps. In consequence, we have suffered degrees of infection of diverse types from time to time. We like to believe that it was not incurably so.

Let it not be forgotten that Sri Lankans, more than twenty-three centuries ago, inherited a vast cultural heritage which was incomparable both in its religious and philosophical richness as well in its maturity in political thought. India of the sixth century B.C., as the homeland of Buddhism, had witnessed the behaviour of both monarchies and republics. The Buddha's advice to kings and statesmen reveal the depth of the experience he had gained with regard to matters of statecraft and the wisdom he exercised in his admonitions about correct and incorrect forms of government.

What is of major interest to us here is that there is nothing in the life of humans which can be divorced from religious thinking. All activities in which humans indulge have to be seasoned and tempered with a religious awareness. In view of the dawn of the new millennium right here and the stage also being set in Sri Lanka now for a new political era, it is nothing but sanity to look around for guidelines.

As recent as 1994, the Oxford University Press published a book by the name **Religion, The Missing Dimension Of Statecraft**, edited by Douglas

Johnston and Cynthia Sampson. With our familiarity in the field of religious studies and our special interest in Buddhism, we had very much anticipated the publication of a work like this. It is not for us to undertake an analysis or assessment of this work here. But we wish to draw the attention of our statesmen in Sri Lanka to the need in the world today to tone political thinking with values drawn from sound and sensible religious thinking. Let me very briefly quote from this book.

" The story goes that just as Ashoka was feeling pangs of regret that arose from the suffering he had caused by his far-flung conquests, he also heard the Enlightened One's teachings. As a result, he left behind his Hindu upbringing and became a Buddhist. He then went on to try to forge a kingdom in which the various religions could dwell together peaceably. Even more importantly, he decided that his commitment to the 'middle way' of the Buddha, although it allowed for self-defence, excluded all wars of aggression." p.272.

In terms of Buddhist thinking, we feel that the role of religion should primarily be to make life in the land, life both of man and animal, secure and free from the disaster and destruction which humans are known to bring upon themselves and those around. This sense of insecurity as well as fear and dread into which man puts the society around him is referred to in Buddhism as *bhayāni* and is classified as being fivefold: *panca-bhayāni*. They result from man's own hostile attitude to the world: *verāni* or *panca-verāni*. This is basically derived from the Buddhist theory of *panca-sila*. They come about in the breach of these regulatory precepts.

It begins with man's disrespect or scant respect for life, of both man and animal. One's own self being put above all else, humans at times turn stupid enough to dismiss and destroy all others that appear even to stand in one's way, in private life and public life. These may range from social, religious to political arenas. At times, these atrocities are defended on grounds of self-defense. But the realities of these are nakedly visible. Individuals as well as larger groups are

seen doing this at world level today. But its legitimacy is being contested all the time. Trials, sooner or later, as of war criminals of World War II at Nuremberg, and of more recent ones being attempted in Bosnia and Albania etc. are testimony of this.

Man has also inherited from some misdirected philosophies some-where that the world around him is created for his gleeful exploitation. Ideas of unreplenishable resources of the world and of ecological balancing had lamentably not dawned on him. Until recently, kill and living to eat the kill had become an acceptable norm. That was good enough during days of primitive thinking. But certainly not today. The wind is now blowing in a different direction. People, above and below, in this part of the world in particular, need to know of these tremendous world movements. Post-World War II thinking savors of this new attitude to the world we live in. It is one of live and let live, a new attitude of man towards man as well as bird and beast, including even the inanimate in the entire eco-system.

Ashamedly turning away from this heartless attitude of man, wave after wave of new thinking has emerged, at least in the English speaking world as far as we know, during the last three or four decades. Books like Frances M. Lappe's **Diet for a Small Planet**, Peter Singer's **Animal Liberation** and **Save the Animals**, Jeremy Riffkin's **Beyond Beef and the Breakdown of the Cattle Culture** and Victoria Moran's **Compassion, the Ultimate Ethic** reveal both the folly of rearing and killing of animals for food and man's own misdirected adventure of mishandling nature, thereby wiping out man's chances of survival on this planet. Particularly a book like **Biophilia Hypothesis** would enlighten us on this issue that no prayers would save us from extinction on this planet at the rate man shows disregard for life.

A state like Sri Lanka which is statutorily pledged to uphold the culture of Buddhism [not merely its infra-structure], and we have no doubt whatsoever that this is what the convention provides for, cannot possibly turn a deaf ear or a blind

eye to this primary aspect of Buddhist culture which the world today is very much in need of. In the name of Buddhism, protection of life of man and animal in the land and guaranteeing them security should be the main theme and the priority of the state policy.

This is what the benevolent king Cakkavatti of early Buddhist tradition stood up for. Besides, the saner and more civilized world is now subscribing towards the same. This respect for life we sponsor is a priority and the crying need of the day, in view of the destruction of life one witnesses all around in the land. Take note of the gruesome killings in the war-torn areas as well as abominable murders of men, women and children of all ages in the village and the town. This is encroaching on animal life too, without any compunction. Whether it be the wanton killing of the elephant with its thinning out population or the poaching in the sanctuaries of the leopard and deer for their skins, or the massive scale killing for human consumption, it is killing all the same. Buddhism requires serious action on the part of rulers in this direction. This is taken up worldwide today. Development policy of any government in this country has necessarily to contain this too, with or without international blessings.

It is for the State to honestly recognize the worth of the religion to which the Britishers undertook in their Convention to give its rightful place. The State must undertake to propagate its cultural content both within the country for the benefit of its inhabitants and to make it widely known to the rest of the world as having a worthy identity of its own. Sri Lanka must surely move in consonance with its cultural heritage. There is nothing in it which the civilized world of today would refuse to accept. These primarily consist of its respect for all forms of life of both man and animal, respect for honesty and integrity in all dealings both individual and social, respect for sexes at all levels both in the home and society, and respect for sanity and soundness of judgment by rejecting drugs and intoxicants. Let us repeat that all these are contained within our universal ethic of *panca-sila*.

Buddhism in the world today, in both forms known until recently as

Mahayana and Vajrayana, is actively engaged in propagating what they now call the teachings of Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni is the historical Buddha Gotama who gave to the world his most humanitarian teaching well over twenty-five centuries ago. The different sects of Buddhism are now obliterating all sectarian differences and are willing to work from a single platform for human goodness and welfare of mankind. The impact of this new cultural move of Buddhism, we know for certain, is now globally felt. It is time for Sri Lanka, with its distinct identity, to rise from its slumber. Do not miss this chance of playing even the second fiddle.

The year 2000 is now round the corner. Sri Lanka expects both of the State and its people new thinking and new lines of action on the dawn of the new millennium. This is the writing on the wall.